

## REFLECTIVE ESSAY

# An Inner City Superintendent's View on Transformational Leadership

Ramona Bishop, EdD, Superintendent, Vallejo City Unified School District

*Editor's Note: In Dr. Ramona Bishop's reflective essay, she intersperses quotes from long ago by Horace Mann, our first Secretary of Education, and ponders over factors that are transformative of schools and classrooms in K-12.*

## Education as the Great Equalizer

Education then, beyond all devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance of social machinery.

– Horace Mann, 1837

In the mid-nineteenth century, seeing universal public education as “the great equalizer,” Horace Mann, the first Secretary of Education, began to build what would become one of the first national educational systems in the world. Secretary Mann felt that education was the antidote to crime, poverty, violence and fraud. He established the first public normal school or teacher’s college, fifty high schools, and numerous teacher institutes. He was also responsible for making the school year six months long. He believed that through education crime would decline sharply as would a host of moral vices like violence and fraud. In short, Mann felt there was no end to the social good which might be derived from a common school. He sought to replicate this notion of public schooling across the nation (Cremin, 1957).

As the Superintendent of the Vallejo City Unified School District, a K-12 district in Vallejo, California, and the most diverse city in the United States (Vallejo Times-Herald, July 11, 2013), I can attest to the fact that education transforms lives. I am convinced that Horace Mann would be proud to see that public education works to-

day. Though it works, its role as “the great equalizer” has yet to be realized. Still, highly skilled teachers, and school and district administrators, who have high expectations for all students in spite of their circumstances, and who take responsibility for the facilitation of student improvement, show that education can be the great equalizer. It is in these isolated places where we tend to find transformational leaders at work. These leaders stand out amongst their peers in that they serve the same students and they achieve better results: higher student achievement in advanced coursework, higher overall grade point averages, higher percentages of students passing exit exams, higher graduation rates, or some combination thereof. These leaders with the necessary will, vision, and skill-set are able to set up systems where all students improve. These leaders succeed in spite of the inequities that may exist in schools.

There are certain educational practices that challenge transformational leaders in making a difference in schools and classrooms. It is well-known that there are differences in support systems between low-funding and high-funding districts (Tyack, 1974). In cases where leaders work in a low-funding district there exists additional stresses and challenges when facilitating the successes of the schools they serve. For example, the phenomenon known as “the Matthew Effect,” identified by sociologist Robert K. Merton, appears to be at play in many educational systems. Based on the biblically authored principal that the “rich get richer and the poor get poorer,” when applied to schools, it explains why some subgroups of students consistently perform well and others do not. The verse from the Gospel of Matthew (13:12) posits that “for whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but

whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath." Sociologists observe that advantages tend to replicate the possibility of advantage, and in turn, disadvantage further impacts group attainment. The net outcome is that it ends up creating perpetual gaps between those with more and those with less (Rigney, 2010). Horace Mann's concept of public school as "the great equalizer" relies on educators being able to create systems that strategically interrupt this social phenomenon. A transformational leader is needed and can thus be defined as an interrupter of the status quo.

### Successful Transformational Leaders

Let us not be content to wait and see what will happen, but give us the determination to make the right things happen.

- Mann, 1837

When remarking about the honor of having been portrayed by Denzel Washington in the "George McKenna Story" (TV movie, 1986), Dr. McKenna often states, "Why make a movie about me? My story should not be the exception." Because of historical patterns of failure in schools serving large percentages of students of color, transformational leaders such as Dr. McKenna are singled out as heroes. They are seen as outliers who are beating the odds in classrooms, schools and districts that have yet to normalize success for other similar student populations.

Only a few educational leaders can claim that they have interrupted the status quo in classrooms, schools or school systems like my friend Dr. McKenna. When they do, the filmmakers come calling with highly regarded actors such as Denzel Washington. There have been numerous movies like *Freedom Writers* (2007), *Stand and Deliver* (1988) and *Lean on Me* (1989) in which the protagonist is successful either teaching or leading a school and delivers results in "inner-city" schools. The truth is that more work is needed to account for the numerous untold stories of successful educators throughout our country. More work is to be done to ensure these stories tell tales of educators who are truly committed to educating all students.

Unfortunately, stories like that of Jaime Escalante, Erin Gruwell, Joe Clark and others, yet to be spotlighted as talented educators, are being muffled by stories where the leader has no choice but to be successful. While stories like that of Dr. Lorraine Monroe are inspiring and relevant,

her tale is a familiar one, one in which she creates a successful magnet for select students as opposed to a public school where all neighborhood students are invited to attend. Regrettably, it appears that the concept of education as the great equalizer is gradually being replaced with the notion that students must qualify or win a lottery to obtain a quality education.

As the newly hired principal of Bret Harte Elementary School in Sacramento, I was surprised to find when school started that, in addition to the bus that transported students from Oak Park to our school in the more affluent Curtis Park, there were also buses to take students to basic schools in the district ([www.scusd.edu](http://www.scusd.edu)). Though the schools are tucked in the heart of Sacramento neighborhoods, they were not necessarily accessible to neighbor-

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hood students. In fact, these basic schools have entrance criteria and provisions for students to be released if they do not uphold agreed upon standards of performance, attendance, student behavior and parent involvement. As a neighborhood school, we accepted all students and were still successful in moving our school from a similar school's ranking of four to an eight.

As the proud principal of Bret Harte Elementary School, a school that was continually celebrated for making significant improvements in all areas of performance, I continued to find myself explaining to prospective parents why our scores were not comparable to the basic schools. State and national reports tend to hold these and other basic schools as models based on their high performance, while not understanding the back story. It is important to understand that the entrance criteria is used to ensure that "good kids" get into the school and stay there. In turn, students who do not perform according to basic school standards are transferred to other schools.

The notion of student body selection branded as "basic schools" in Sacramento City Schools takes different forms in other school districts. One example is the

selective school concept in Chicago Public Schools. As parents prepare their children for high school in Chicago, they receive information from the school district on their children's 7th grade iSAT scores as well as seventh grade final grades in reading, math, science and social studies. This information is used to determine the eligibility of programs into which students can apply, and whether they qualify for selective enrollment into magnet, military, career technical education or international baccalaureate. In addition, students who wish to enter a selective enrollment elementary or high school program must take and pass an additional academic exam ([www.cps.edu](http://www.cps.edu)).

The student body for selective enrollment high schools in Chicago is built on a complex tier system, with the goal of ensuring that students from all socio-economic backgrounds have opportunities for admissions into the best high schools. Thirty percent of the seats go to the highest performing applicants regardless of where they live in the city. In other words, students who do the best academically have the best chance of getting into one of the top six selective high schools in the city. These students tend to live in wealthier areas populated by highly educated residents. More specifically, in 2012-13, Lane Tech High School, a top-performing selective enrollment high school had 1000 seats. They took the top 300 of the highest performing students from across the city. They then took the top-scoring 175 students from each of the other tiers. Chicago Public Schools creates the tier map utilizing the city's census and geographic information. Students from the more affluent tier 4 score between 839 and 861, while students from the poorer Tier 1 areas had scores between 737 and 856 (<http://cpstiers.opencityapps.org/about.html>). The question is: What happens to the students who are left in the neighborhood school once the selection processes is complete for these selective high schools where test scores are a part of the consideration for admissions? What is the composition of the staff and what kinds of supports are in place to ensure that all children have an opportunity to learn and not only those with the highest test scores?

Transformational leaders must take the helm of schools and districts where there are no entrance criteria, no special assessment for admissions and no ability on the part of the administration to remove students for not adhering to certain policies. The central questions become: Where are the examples of leaders that have actualized

Horace Mann's dream? Where are the leaders who have the will and the skill to make a difference systemically, institutionally and socially?

### Transformational Leadership

Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.

- Mann, 1837

Perhaps due to the absence of predictable patterns of success in schools or school districts, researchers seem to be stuck in deficit modes of thinking as well, studying patterns of failure, diagnosing all possible contributing factors that serve historically underserved students. Of late, politicians and advocates for privatization and vouchers have utilized negative perceptions of public schools' ability to educate all children as evidence to support their efforts at creating more charters or give vouchers to parents seeking a "better education" for their children. The transformational leader in these sagas is the recent college graduate that has "chosen" to be a teacher or a principal in the "toughest neighborhoods." Their goal is to enhance underserved communities.

The charter school movement is just old enough for researchers to have determined that they are not the silver bullet or a panacea. The achievement gap persists in these schools as readily as it does in "regular" public schools (Au, 2011). There are schools, "charter" and "traditional public," that are breaking historical patterns of underachievement and there are schools of both kinds that have yet to achieve the desirable results. It is the case in Washington D.C. Public Schools that the charters are beginning to gain a competitive edge as far as student performance. Yet it appears that the fact that underperforming schools are closed when they do not perform well has helped the overall achievement levels in charter schools ([www.credo.stanford.edu](http://www.credo.stanford.edu), 2013). The answer is creating systems with organizational synchronicity, as measured by their results over time, that focus on strong student-centered indicators of success. These indicators include attendance, student achievement, graduation rates and parent-community participation. This is the challenge before us, the venue through which a transformational leader enters.

As a leader, I have been described as a fastidious facilitator, an unselfish community-builder, a lover of people, an approachable intellect, and most-importantly, a

listener. The effective leader is best described in Good to Great as a Level 5 Leader, a humble driver who focuses on “getting the right people on the bus in the right seats” and maintaining a focus on results (Collins, 2001).

The elements of leadership Collins posits as essential for getting results are needed in the schools that have not had strong student outcomes. Schools that have institutionalized strong student outcomes tend to have some benefits that may be invisible to the layperson. The interested party may compare the school with strong student

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outcomes to those with poor outcomes based on enrollment criteria or lack thereof, zip code, free and reduced lunch count, percentages of students by NCLB subgroup, etc. When these comparisons are made, researchers are often stunned to find the achievement gap is more pervasive than imagined. Indeed, they find that the opportunity gaps in urban settings are persistent, generational and often steeped in institutional and bureaucratic mediocrity. The aforementioned Matthew Effect becomes more of a reality than we would ever like to believe.

#### **For Education to Truly Become the Great Equalizer...**

Education then, beyond all devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance of social machinery.

- Mann, 1837

The voice of all stakeholders matter in communities of wealth, and there is no alternative but to have high expectations of all students because their families are rightfully entitled to demand the best for their children. What if the same were true for those who need more of our care and concern? What if we did this for the poor, immigrant, speakers of other languages and other disenfranchised members of our society?

The parents in wealthy communities know how to navigate educational systems to get what they want from them. Specifically, through their informal communication networks they know who the best teachers are in the school and arrange for their children to have those teachers. Teachers and school administrators that do not have a good reputation often do not last long in wealthy schools or somehow get the classes filled with students who do not have active advocates. What if the same were true for those who need more of our care and concern?

When students from wealthy families fail, there are tutors and mentors assigned to them, whether through a community network or a private company. The students will receive the assistance they need to graduate and matriculate into postsecondary opportunities or other family-planned pathways. What if the same were true for students who need more of our care and concern?

The transformational leader is the one who creates the space for all children to have what children of privilege have. As an educator who has enhanced student outcomes in urban classrooms, schools and districts, I have been accused of being rebellious, an “out-of-touch” dreamer and an outsider who just doesn’t understand “these kids”. My drive is fueled by the fact that I was educated in urban public schools and I have real examples of the system working for all students. I know executives of major organizations, attorneys at law, entrepreneurs and other professionals who matriculated through the system and are doing quite well. I am also driven by constant reminders of students who were as intellectually capable as my professional friends and who were tragically underserved by the very system that served me so well. The needed transformational leaders is the one who goes beyond the talk of transformation and actualization and ignores others while they watch, shaking their heads, and point their finger in protest. Transformational leaders are visionaries that can see beyond our current circumstances and who still have hope for the future. I have seen and met many transformational leaders on their way up. They make it only so high before politics and timing pulls them down. The challenge is for us all to create the political space for transformational leaders to do their work so we can have more movies about excellent educators like George McKenna.

The fact is that there are teachers and leaders in our systems right now that can be tapped to transform our

schools. As superintendents and college presidents, we must be intentional about our efforts not only to tap those talented leaders but to support them as they take the reins. Because the transformational leaders are working to change the status quo, the employee will need strategic support and understanding from a supervising mentor who helps them as they navigate the politics associated with the change process. The careful selection, training, support and coaching of these leaders is what it will take to ensure that all children have great educational experiences. All our children deserve this!

### Further Reading

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### About the Author

DR. RAMONA BISHOP is the Superintendent of the Vallejo City Unified School District. Dr. Bishop has served as Superintendent since 2011 and since has led the district team on an aggressive reform agenda.

Email: [rdbishop71@aol.com](mailto:rdbishop71@aol.com)